



Frequently Asked Questions about Drought 2005

Water Resources

General drought questions

Q: *How bad is the drought? Could it be the worst on record?*

A: Unlike other natural disasters — like earthquakes and severe storms — droughts unfold slowly and affect different areas, in different ways, at different times. It is too early to predict how this drought will compare with past droughts.

Q: *Why is it too early to tell how bad this drought will be?*

A: It is still spring so it is possible that cool temperatures and lots of wet weather might reduce the severity of drought conditions in some parts of the state. However, because the weather in mid-November 2004 through mid-March 2005 was so abnormally dry and warm, Washington did not get its usual rain and mountain snowpack accumulations.

Q: *Where are the effects of the drought being felt right now?*

A: Right now, drought conditions are particularly acute in Eastern Washington, especially the Yakima River basin area. The Department of Ecology also has sent orders to interruptible water right holders in the Wenatchee, Methow and Little Spokane river basins that they must call the department daily to see if they can pump water from the streams and rivers in these basins.

In Western Washington, rainy weather in early spring has helped in many places. However, we are just at the start of the state's dry season, so the state has a long way to go.

State and federal agencies constantly monitor snowpack and stream flow conditions, reservoir operations and soil moisture to determine where emergency water-right actions are needed. The state also uses this critical information to determine where investments in infrastructure projects will make the greatest difference. In past droughts, these types of projects have included helping improve or stabilize state hatchery operations and upgrade public irrigation and municipal water supply systems.

Q: *How can I get current information about drought conditions in Washington?*

A: The Department of Ecology has launched a 2005 Drought Web site at:
<http://www.WashingtonDrought.org>

The site provides a wide overview of drought- and fire-related information including:

- Emergency water right activities by the Department of Ecology, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, Yakama Nation and other entities.

- Other state and federal agency drought response actions.

- Current water supply conditions.



Workshops and public meetings.

Applications forms for drought permits.

Water conservation – actions homeowners, businesses and farmers can take to use water wisely.

Drought-related news releases in Washington.

Fire and air quality information.

Science, data and links.

Images.

Drought laws and regulations.

Drought contacts at state agencies.

For example, the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) maintains a Web site where you can get real-time stream flow conditions in many river systems in Washington:

<http://wa.water.usgs.gov/realtime/current.html>

Q: *When was Washington's worst drought on record?*

A: 1977 was the state's worst recorded drought year.

Q: *Before this year, how many times has Washington declared a drought emergency?*

A: We've had drought emergencies in 1977 (statewide), 1992 (regional), 1994 (regional) and 2001 (statewide).

Q: *Are we better prepared for a drought this year than we were in 2001?*

A: Yes. Since the last statewide drought emergency in 2001, the state has invested millions of dollars in water storage studies, water-use efficiency projects, replacement of leaky water pipes and ditches with state-of-the-art systems to enhance water supplies where needed, and to installation of systems to reuse treated wastewater.

Municipal water investments since 2001 drought:

City of Kent received \$230,000 to upgrade its water system.

City of Goldendale got \$180,000 to help bring a new water source on line.

The departments of Ecology and Health also have worked together to approve 17 municipal projects that will reclaim and reuse about 22 million gallons of water a day.

Agricultural irrigation investments:

Washington Conservation Commission has invested \$5.1 million to improve the efficiency of irrigation systems on 23 farms in Clallam, Columbia, Kittitas, Yakima and Walla Walla counties. This includes plans to close or line irrigation ditches and canals and switch to water-saving irrigation systems. A portion of the saved water will remain in streams for fish.

Department of Ecology has provided another \$8.7 million to improve how water is delivered to farmers, irrigation districts and water users throughout Washington.

Habitat improvements:

After the 2001 drought, Ecology and the Department of Fish & Wildlife developed a water-right acquisition plan targeting 16 watersheds where leasing, purchasing or accepting donated water rights to keep water in streams would help fish the most. The state has since purchased, leased or accepted donations of 52 water rights in seven watersheds.

Fish and Wildlife currently is assessing stream locations where adult salmon and trout could potentially be prevented from migrating upstream because of shallow stream flows. Temporary fish-passage solutions may be needed in some locations.

Water storage:

In the past four years, Ecology approved permits to construct seven new reservoirs that, together, will store more than 1,100 acre-feet of supplemental irrigation and frost-control water for farmers in Eastern Washington.

Ecology also has contributed more than \$1.5 million in construction-study funds for the proposed Pine Hollow reservoir in Yakima County, the Lake Wenatchee reservoir, and two water-storage projects in Walla Walla.

The department is readying an additional \$1.76 million for seven other water-storage studies across the state.

The state of Washington committed \$4 million toward a broader study to determine the viability of constructing the proposed Black Rock reservoir in Benton County.

Ecology has earmarked \$950,000 for water-storage studies in King County, including \$500,000 to the city of North Bend.

Q: *What are the state's priorities in responding to a drought?*

A: Under the state's comprehensive emergency management plan, the Department of Ecology has the lead role for responding to drought. The department has developed a specific drought-contingency program that focuses on:

Maintaining crucial energy supplies

Aiding state agriculture

Protecting public water supplies

Safeguarding stream flows for fish

Preparing to fight fires

Department of Ecology's role

Q: *When was this year's statewide drought emergency declared?*

A: March 10, 2005.

Q: *When will the drought emergency officially be over?*

A: The drought emergency will remain in effect until at least Dec. 31, 2005, although it can be terminated earlier if conditions warrant or extended further, if the drought persists

Q: *What kinds of conditions did Ecology look at in deciding whether to declare a drought?*

A: It's important to distinguish between a "drought" and a "drought emergency." Under state law, Ecology must apply a two-part test before a drought emergency can be declared:

1. An area has to be experiencing, or expected to experience, less than 75 percent of normal water supplies; AND
2. An area must be expected to suffer undue hardships as a result of the dry conditions.

By early March, we determined that both situations existed for much, if not all, of the state. On March 10, Gov. Christine Gregoire gave written authority for Ecology to declare a statewide drought emergency.

Q: *What are considered to be "undue hardships?"*

A: Hardships could include crop failures, low stream flows that could kill fish, and possible shortages of municipal water.

Q: *What types of hardships are you seeing right now?*

A: The severe water shortage in the Yakima River basin is creating a hardship for many farmers and other water users. Ecology is working with the state Department of Fish and Wildlife, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, Yakama Nation, irrigation districts and other water users to help transfer water from senior to more junior water-right holders. This "water-right transfer group" will make recommendations to a Yakima County Superior Court judge who has final say on surface-water transfers in the Yakima basin.

Q: *In a practical sense, what does a "declaration of drought emergency" mean?*

A: As the lead drought-response agency, Ecology can, in an expedited fashion:

Authorize temporary transfers of water rights – to help redistribute water to more-critical uses.

Permit previously-drilled emergency wells to be used.

Permit new emergency wells to be drilled or allow the use of alternative sources of water.

Issue temporary water permits to expand capacity on existing wells.

Purchase and lease water rights.

Q: *Will every application automatically be approved?*

A: No. Water must be available, and we can't approve an application that would impair the

water supply for a senior water-right holder. For the most part, we will manage the drought by transferring existing valid water rights rather than issuing permits for new water withdrawals.

Q: *What kinds of actions have already occurred because of the declaration?*

A: The emergency declaration allowed access to the state Water Emergency Account. Ecology is reaching out to senior water-right holders to see who may be able and willing to lease some or all of their water this year to others who need it. Ecology and other agencies are:

Hiring additional staff to help process emergency water-right applications.

Identifying water rights that may be available for lease or purchase.

Providing other assistance that will be necessary in the months ahead.

Q: *What is Ecology going to do to halt illegal water use so farmers and others with valid water rights get their water?*

A: It is important that people do not use water that they are not entitled to, especially in a drought year. In some areas, there are court orders in place that require Ecology to actively look for signs of illegal water use and report it to a judge for further follow-up. In other parts of the state, Ecology will first work to make sure that people know the law and know how much water they're entitled to, etc. When that kind of technical assistance doesn't work, then Ecology may have to take formal enforcement action.

Q: *Has Ecology authorized a reduction in minimum flows in the Columbia River like you did in 2001?*

A: No. The rule states that the 330 or so junior water-right holders making diversions out of the Columbia River must curtail their water use if on March 1, the Columbia River at The Dalles Dam is discharging 60 million acre feet (MAF) or less. On March 1, the Columbia was discharging 60.6 MAF.

Q: *What if the Columbia River at The Dalles Dam falls below 60 MAF after March 1; will junior water-right holders have to curtail or stop making withdrawals out of the river?*

A: No. The state rule is tied only to the March 1 discharge rate.

Q: *Is there a chance the drought declaration could be lifted sooner?*

A: There is always that chance. However, it is still early in the season and we are already experiencing moderate to extreme drought conditions in Eastern Washington and watching conditions closely in Western Washington.

Water conservation

Q: *When is Ecology going to start asking the public to cut back on its water use (restricting lawn watering, car washing, etc.)?*

A: Ecology does not have the authority to impose use restrictions on public water systems, no matter how large or how small. Only individual public water suppliers can do that – so be sure to pay close attention to what your water utility or provider is telling its customers.

Q: *Is it possible some communities won't be asking their customers to conserve water?*

A: It could happen. Every municipal water department routinely asks citizens to use water wisely – whether it's a wet year or a drought year. All large water systems have plans for

addressing water shortages. How far they will have to go this year in activating these plans will vary from water system to water system.

Everyone should think about how to save water in their homes and their businesses — and be ready to follow whatever instructions they get from their local water supplier.

Q: *What can I do right now to conserve water at my home?*

A: There are many things you can do to use water wisely. For example, here are some things you can do outside to save water around your home:

Consider converting to low-water landscaping.

Select the right plants for the right place and choose plants, shrubs, and trees that need minimal water.

Consider drip irrigation for plants, shrubs, and trees.

Water your lawn early in the morning or later in the evening and be mindful when it's windy. The water you're using may not be getting to your plants and garden.

Limit the water you use to approximately one inch per week, including rainfall. For best results, moisten the soil between 4 and 6 inches deep with each watering.

Here are some things you can do inside your home:

Take shorter showers.

Don't let the water run when you are shaving, brushing your teeth, or hand washing dishes.

Turn on the tap only when you need it.

Don't use faucets at full pressure.

Make sure you have a full load before running your washing machine or dishwasher.

Convert to water-efficient toilets, faucets and showerheads. Check with your local utility; some offer free or give out rebates toward the purchase of water-efficient shower heads and faucet aerators.

Q: *What can I do right now to conserve water at my business?*

A: There are many things you can do, for example:

Update your cooling and refrigeration systems.

Invest in water-efficient laundry equipment.

Install water-efficient toilets and urinals

Move to low-water use landscaping and irrigation systems.

For more information about home and business water-conservation tips, go to:

<http://www.WashingtonDrought.org> (click on the heading "Water Conservation").

Wells

Q: *I live in an area where there are no public water suppliers. I get my water from a well. What do I do if my well has problems, like going dry, during the drought?*

A: Contact your local health department in the county the well is located for problems with wells or wells going dry. For problems with groups of wells, contact the state Department of Health.

Q: *Can farmers and cities start using the emergency wells they drilled during previous droughts?*

A: First they must submit an application to Ecology. The department will make a decision within 15 days. For each application, the department will have to determine whether withdrawing water from a particular well would impair the water supply for any senior water-right holders this year. Ecology already has approved more than 70 drought-related requests to reactivate an existing emergency well or have new ones drilled.

Stream flows and drought

Q: *Why are low stream flows bad?*

A: Low levels of flowing water in our streams and rivers can:

- Restrict fish passage and degrade habitat.

- Raise water temperatures.

- Degrade water quality by concentrating pollutants.

- Affect recreational activities like fishing and boating.

- Impact farmers and other people who rely on taking water directly from a river or stream for irrigating crops and other uses.

- Indicate that underground (ground) water levels could be dropping, too.

Q: *Can low stream flows on the surface cause problems with levels of underground (ground) water?*

A: It can, depending on how underground (ground) water is replenished in a particular area. Many factors affect how ground water is recharged, including soil type, topography, the number of withdrawals by wells, how much an area depends on melting snow or rain to recharge an aquifer, etc.

Fire prevention and firefighting

Q: *What is the state doing to prepare for forest fires this year? Will you need to increase the budget to cover the costs?*

A: Public Lands Commissioner Doug Sutherland has said that he is very concerned about this year's fire season. The state Department of Natural Resources (DNR) plans to hire and train firefighters three months early this year, in case things flare up faster than normal. The Governor has requested \$200,000 to help DNR respond. In addition, the department will provide training to the National Guard so they are fully prepared to support fire-fighting efforts as well.

Q: *What can people do to prevent wildfires?*

A: All citizens can do their part to prevent fires. Everyone who drives on a woodland highway, owns a home in the woods, hikes or camps needs to be careful to not start a fire. This includes:

Extinguish all cigarettes in ashtrays – never toss a cigarette out the window of your vehicle — not only is this a fire risk, you could be subject to a fine of up to \$1,025.

Carefully extinguish campfires or not starting campfires where prohibited.

Consider alternatives to burning yard or waste debris.

Create “safety zones” to separate homes and property from combustible plants and vegetation.

Q: *Will there be budget constraints for fighting fires this year?*

A: Budget is never an issue when it comes to fighting fires. DNR will mobilize every resource it needs to fight fires. If the budget runs out this summer, we’ll take care of it in next year’s supplemental budget.

Q: *Where can I get a rain barrel?*

A: Check with your local hardware store or nursery. Ecology does not provide rain barrels and does not keep information about where to get them.

Q: *I've heard that to use a rain barrel on my property that I need to first get a water right from Ecology. Is that true?*

A: The Department of Ecology is not requiring that people obtain a water right for water barrels, especially if the captured rain will be used on an individual's property for outdoor uses such as watering landscape or a garden.

Statewide drought emergency: Other agencies’ roles and responsibilities

During the drought emergency, a wide variety of other state agencies besides Ecology have various response roles and responsibilities. These include:

The Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA), which has assembled a special Drought Response Action Team. The team will work with agricultural organizations across the state to:

Monitor state water supplies.

Secure additional federal funding for affected areas.

Provide technical assistance and funding to local conservation districts.

WSDA’s drought contact person is Linda Crerar at (360) 902-1818.

The Washington State Department of Health’s (DOH) Office of Drinking Water, which is helping public water systems manage and conserve drinking water to reduce the risk of shortages. The department also is monitoring various public water systems to:

Determine the vulnerability of individual water systems.

Understand measures being taken locally to address the drought.

Assess the need for state assistance.

DOH's drought contact person is Ginny Stern at 360-236-3134.

The Washington State Department of Fish & Wildlife (WDF&W), which will:

Identify and monitor potential trouble spots for fish in streams across the state.

Mark, map and locate water-critical stream reaches where activities such as emergency water rights and transfers could create problem stream conditions for fish.

Highlight stream reaches where conservation and water-right leasing or purchases would do the most good for fish.

WDF&W's drought contact person is Steve Keller at 360-902-2241.

The Washington State Department of Natural Resources (DNR), State Fire Marshal and the Washington State Department of the Military's Emergency Management Division (EMD) who are:

Monitoring forest-fire conditions and prepare for fire-fighting.

Advising forest residents on how to protect their property from fires.

DNR's fire prevention and response contact person is Roger Autry at 360-902-1316.

Fire Marshal's Office contact person is Dan Johnson at 360-753-0498.

EMD's drought and wildfire contact person is Rob Harper at 253-512-7005.

The Washington Conservation Commission (WCC) which will:

Work with the state Department of Agriculture in documenting agricultural hardships.

Assist the Department of Ecology with drought communications.

WCC's drought contact person is Mark Clark at 360-407-6201.

The Washington Employment Security Department (ESD), which will:

Track unemployment related to drought.

Streamline unemployment applications.

Provide appropriate service response.

ESD's drought contact person is Richard Kaglic at 360-438-4812.

The Washington Department of Community, Trade & Economic Development (CTED), which will assess:

Overall economic effects of drought.

Individual community response needs, typically through grants.

CTED's drought contact person is Michelle Zahrly at 360-725-4019.

Economic assistance

Q: *Does declaring a drought emergency trigger any kind of federal assistance? Have you asked for federal assistance yet?*

A: The only federal assistance is provided by USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA). FSA provides disaster assistance in the form of low-interest loans to farmers. Disaster declarations are made at the county level by FSA.

Q: *Can the Governor ask the President to declare a disaster?*

A: It's too soon to say whether the state would ask for a disaster declaration from the President or the Secretary of Agriculture. The decision to ask for a disaster declaration is made at the county level by the federal Farm Service Agency (FSA). The FSA provides information about crop loss and the extent of the damage to the state Department of Agriculture, which would then review the information and forward the recommendation to the Governor's Office. The state must have substantial information to pursue a disaster declaration, and only the Governor's Office may request a disaster declaration.

Q: *Are there any state grant programs to help businesses that have economic trouble because of the drought?*

A: The Department of Community, Trade and Economic Development (CTED) has a few loan and grant programs and other technical assistance that may be available to businesses and communities during a drought emergency. There are a lot of variables, so it's best to contact CTED directly if you have questions.

There are no grant programs available through the state Department of Agriculture to provide drought assistance to farmers.

Q: *Are there any federal funds available to help farmers or other types of businesses?*

A: If a federal disaster declaration is made, farmers are eligible for federal low-interest loans. In that event, the U.S. Small Business Administration will also declare an associated "economic-injury disaster" and provide low-interest loans to other businesses affected by the crop losses.

Q: *Are there special unemployment programs for workers who lose their jobs because of the drought?*

A: Only if the President declares a disaster at the request of the Governor, then the Disaster Unemployment Assistance Program provides special assistance. Workers who lose their jobs as a result of the disaster can qualify for disaster benefits if they do not qualify for benefits under the state's regular unemployment insurance program. For more information, please contact the Employee Service Department at (800) 362-4636.

Global warming

Q: *The last time we had a statewide drought emergency was in 2001 – and the last one before that was in 1977. Do you think global warming is increasing the frequency and severity of droughts in Washington?*

A: There are a lot of credible scientists telling us that global warming is affecting our region, and drought and water shortages are among the symptoms we can expect to see. At the same time, droughts also are a part of the natural climatic pattern. Whatever is causing this drought,

the governor wants Washington to be as prepared as possible to respond, and we will do whatever we can within our authority and available resources.

Miscellaneous drought questions

Q: *During our last drought emergency in 2001, we also had an energy emergency. Do you anticipate another one this year?*

A: No, we do not anticipate any shortage of energy, drought-related blackouts or brown-outs.

Q: *I own a nursery or landscaping business. Ecology's statewide drought declaration is hurting my business. What is the state going to do about it?*

A: Ecology appreciates that current drought conditions are affecting certain parts of the state as well as specific economic sectors. We understand your concern and we have been sharing information about the state's water-supply situation with industry representatives. We have been urging citizens to turn to their local nursery and landscape professionals for advice on what to plant, or how to help their existing landscape survive on less water. The services that your industry provides are more valuable than ever during this drought year.

Q: *What are you going to do about the town of Roslyn, the summer camps and cabin owners whose water may get cut off by senior water-right holders in the Yakima River basin?*

A: The town of Roslyn is working to acquire water after the Yakima Superior Court ruled that the community's water right was junior in status to most, if not all, irrigation districts. The town would have to stop taking water out of the Yakima Basin. Ecology has helped the town secure temporary water this year and is working with Roslyn to find a permanent source of non-interruptible water.

Q: *Are there other towns/cities at risk of water shortages this year?*

A: Small communities that rely solely on groundwater sources for their water could experience problems. And even big cities may need to activate their conservation plans this year. The Department of Health will contact water systems across the state to determine if they are experiencing any problems and how they intend to address them.

Q: *How will fishing seasons be affected?*

A: It's too soon to say. The Department of Fish & Wildlife is monitoring the situation closely and will be part of the state's drought-management team. In fact, we will rely on them for advice about where we may need to lease water rights in order to keep streams flowing for fish.

Q: *Does Ecology believe that people's needs should come ahead of fish needs?*

A: There are a lot of people whose livelihoods rely on fishing so it's hard to separate fish needs from people needs. Certainly, we will make it a priority to ensure our citizens have water for drinking and other basic needs. However, if the choice becomes watering lawns and washing cars or keeping streams flowing for fish, most people would agree fish deserve some consideration.

Q: *Will saving water in Seattle help farmers in Eastern Washington?*

A: No, but it is important that we all use water wisely. We are all in this together and working together we can get through this emergency.

Q: *Will reducing the use of hydro-electricity use free up more water for farmers, fish, or drinking water?*

A: Water is stored in reservoirs and subsequently released to meet a number of purposes. Depending upon where the reservoir is located, saving water that would ordinarily be used to generate electricity could be used for other purposes.

Q: *Will shipping/barging in the Columbia River be affected?*

A: If flows drop low enough, shipping certainly could be affected, although it appears highly unlikely. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and other federal agencies will watch the situation very closely.

Information on this topic can be accessed through Ecology's Web site. The address is:

<http://www.ecy.wa.gov/...>

If you require this document in an alternate format, please contact Water Resources reception at (360) 407-6600 or TTY (for the speech or hearing impaired) at 711 or 1-800-833-6388.